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Factors for the Acquisition of Exceptional Performance for Soccer Players under Eighteen

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The purpose of this investigation was to describe the factors for the acquisition of exceptional performance for soccer players. This study focused on the developmental patterns of five talented soccer players under eighteen in Japan. In-depth interviews were conducted with each player, their parents and coaches. Interviews focused on the players' environment and the process of deliberate practice from their early childhood to the high school age. The result indicated three factors which were essential for the acquisition of exceptional performance: 1) environmental support, 2) motivation, 3) strong commitment to daily effortful practice. For example, firstly, the players had rich support from their families during initiation phase. Their parents and older sister supported the player by dropping the players off at the practice field and picking them up there for each practice. Secondly, the players hope to be professional football player in the near future. Thirdly, it was indicated that the players spent an average of more than 5,000 hours practicing on football devotedly over 10 years. In short, the developmental patterns of talented players were influenced by many mutual factors. Effortful and continuous practice supported by human and physical resources have been shown to be essential for the acquisition of exceptional performance.

Keywords: Exceptional performance, Environment, Family, Motivation, Commitment

It is popularly believed that talent are inborn and inherent, and that those players with inborn talent acquire exceptional performance easily. But the development of exceptional performance is believed to result from deliberate practice (Ericsson, 1996 ; Salmer, 1996). In addition, the environment, such as players' families, schools and communities, affect sensitive players in their childhood (Bloom, 1995). Our study focused on the developmental patterns of five Japanese soccer players under eighteen. The research questions are "what kind of process did talented players go through to acquire their superb performance?" , and "What was the environment for these players and how did the environment affect them?"

Method

Participants were five Japanese soccer players under eighteen. They were national team candidates under eighteen. On average, they have practiced soccer for about eleven years. In-depth interviews were conducted with each player, his parents, brothers and coaches. Interviews focused on the players' environment and the process of deliberate practice from their early childhood to the high school age.

Table 1-Participants

| Player | Age | Yrs. Practice |
|--------|-----|---------------|
| T | 17 | 9 Years |
| A | 17 | 11 Years |
| G | 17 | 12 Years |
| U | 17 | 11 Years |
| S | 17 | 11 Years |

Result

The result indicated three factors which were essential for the acquisition of exceptional performance: (1) environmental support, (2) motivation, (3) strong commitment to daily practice.

(1) *Environmental support*

The players received rich supports from their families, coaches and practice partners during their initiation phase.

My parents and older sister supported me; they dropped me off and picked me up at the training field for each practice.

(Player T)

My older brother was my goal when I was a kid, and at the same time he was my practice partner. (Player A)

And the players grew up in the areas where soccer is popular amongst children in Japan. Table 2 shows the number of soccer teams in each area in Japan. For example, the number of professional soccer teams in the Kanto area tops the other areas. In fact, almost half of the teams are in this region. The players I interviewed have grown up in that area.

This environment is excellent for children who play soccer, because many soccer games are held here and players are motivated to practice hard to win these games. (Player U's father)

(2) *Motivation*

Constant practice with high motivation led the players to develop their performance. In addition, the players hope to be professional football player in the near future.

Table 2-Number of teams in each area

| Area | Professional teams | Elementary school teams | Junior high school teams | High school teams |
|-------------|--------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| TOHOKU | 3 | 1122 | 982 | 663 |
| KANTOU | 13 | 2447 | 1834 | 1240 |
| HOKUSINNETU | 1 | 418 | 426 | 317 |
| TOKAI | 3 | 883 | 856 | 457 |
| KINKI | 4 | 858 | 741 | 651 |
| CHUGOKU | 1 | 613 | 396 | 304 |
| SIKOKU | 0 | 294 | 266 | 163 |
| KYUSHU | 3 | 1321 | 898 | 557 |
| Total | 28 | 8056 | 6399 | 4352 |

I belonged to the top soccer club in the area. Although it took me long to get there, I thought that was the best choice to discipline myself and practice hard. (Player S)

Soccer practice was fun when I was in the junior high. So I guess I made the greatest progress in that age. (Player U)

(3) *Strong commitment to daily practice*

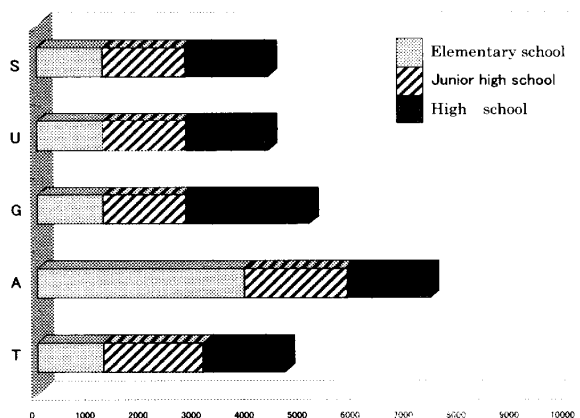
The players got the development of exceptional performance by their strong commitment to daily practice. The development of exceptional performance is believed to result from this continuous deliberate practice.

I think my young brother wasn't a physically strong kid. But he trained himself so hard, and he became one of the top players in the team. (Player T's older brother)

I often told my children that the most important thing is to put as much effort as they can into what they are doing. (Player G's father)

And it was indicated that the players spent an average of more than 5,000 hours practicing on football devotedly over 10 years. In addition, their training had to be of good quality.

Figure1-Practice hours



Conclusion

The developmental patterns of talented players were influenced by many mutual factors. Effortful and regular practices supported by human and physical resources were essential for the acquisition of exceptional performance. And their high motivation was needed to give strong commitment to their daily practice. These factors lead the players to deliberate practice, and nurture their performance.

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「U18 サッカー選手を対象とした卓越したパフォーマンス獲得要因に関する研究」

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一般的に、才能とは生まれつき備わっており、才能に恵まれた選手はいとも簡単に卓越したパフォーマンスを得ることができると考えられがちである。しかし、才能は何年にも渡る日頃の洗練された訓練によって形成されるものであるとする近年の研究も報告されている (Ericsson 1996, Salmela 1996)。さらに、そうした才能が形成される過程において、家族、学校および地域社会といった環境は、幼年期にある周囲の影響を受けやすい選手に大きな影響があると報告されている (Bloom 1995)。

本研究では 18 歳以下の日本人サッカー選手 5 名の発達過程を取り上げている。深層のインタビューが各選手、彼らの両親およびコーチを対象として行われた。インタビューは選手の幼年期から高校までの彼らを取り巻く環境と練習過程に焦点を当て行われた。

結果として、卓越したパフォーマンスを獲得する上で重要と考えられる 3 つの要因が示唆された。すなわち、(1) 環境的支援、(2) 競技意欲、および (3) 専心性である。第 1 の環境的支援に関しては、まず練習導入期において選手は家族から大きな支援を得ている。両親や姉は練習の度に、選手の送り迎えをしていた。また、兄は良き目標であり、同時に練習相手でもあった。第 2 の競技意欲に関しては、選手は高い目的意識を持って練習を続けてきた。例えば、選手は自ら厳しい練習をするために、選手が育った地域で 1 番レベルの高いサッカークラブに所属していた。そして、選手は長年にわたる献身的な練習を継続し、最終的に各選手は将来プロのサッカー選手になることを目指している。第 3 の専心性に関しては、選手は 10 年に渡り、平均 5,000 時間以上をサッカーの練習に費やしてきた。同時に、練習には高い質が求められる。卓越したパフォーマンスの発達には長年にわたる deliberate practice (計画的に熟慮された練習) の結果であると考えられる。選手が才能を発達させるためには様々な要因が相互的に影響し合っている。その中でも、人的物的環境によって支援されている献身的で継続された練習は、卓越したパフォーマンス獲得のために必要不可欠であることが示唆された。また、高い競技意欲は専心性を高めるのに大きな役割を果たしている。これらの要因が選手を deliberate practice へと導き、パフォーマンスを育成していく点が明らかにされた。